

## KEY FACTORS IN TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### Wholistic Lifelong Learning Stream

### The Millennium Connection

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#### I. Establishing a holding environment

In transformative learning a key element is **creating a safe environment**.

This enhances learning by:

- Providing a space for growth and change
- Affirming the learner's life experience and who the learner is
- Building on the learner's intrinsic values

This is illustrated by:

- Positive, encouraging feedback
- A climate of mutual respect and trust

In transformative learning a key element is **establishing mutually supportive relationships**. This element enhances learning by:

- Acknowledging the power of emotional insight
- Encouraging continuous, spontaneous relationships
- Allowing and encouraging bonds between all learners
- Creating student and teacher mutuality

This element is illustrated by:

- The mentoring relationship, including the potential for both to be changed.
- Teacher being seen as a facilitator of learning rather than expert

In transformative learning a key element is **building supportive alliances**. This element enhances learning by:

- Providing the means of sustaining the learning process
- Eliciting resources from the community
- Reinforcing the benefits to the individual and society
- Extending learning to diverse allied groups

This element is illustrated by:

- Learning institutions receiving support from civic institutions
- Collaborative relationships involving diverse groups from multiple sectors.

#### II. Promoting learner centeredness

In transformative learning a key element is **letting the learner lead**. This element enhances learning by:

- Affirming students' confidence and building on their strengths
- Reducing dependence on the teachers' knowledge or expertise
- Giving learners ownership of and responsibility for their own learning
- Trusting the learner
- Teaching what the learner needs

This element is illustrated by:

- Asking the learner to tell their own story in their own way

- Increasing the learner's confidence in asking questions
- Encouraging participation of learners in planning their own curriculum
- Acknowledging that learner accepts responsibility for learning

In transformative learning a key element is **utilizing fully the learner's capacities**. This element enhances learning by:

- Working with learners' multiple talents, potentials, and awareness
- Bringing all learners' capacities to the learning situation.

This element is illustrated by:

- Learning plans and curricula that include cultural differences, various learning styles, and generational perspectives
- Encouraging multiple points of view and multiple intelligences
- Acknowledging that learners have a broad base of experience upon which to draw

In transformative learning a key element is **developing reflective capacity**. This element enhances learning by:

- Enabling new meaning to arise from experience

This is illustrated by:

- Creating space, time, and methods for reflection to be an inherent part of the learning process
- Discussion-based learning environments

### III. Engaging change

In transformative learning a key element is **discerning the opportunity in disorienting situations**. This element enhances learning by:

- Encouraging tenacity and courage in disorienting situations
- Switching the questions from "what have I lost" to "what is my possibility"?
- Seeing crisis as a starting point for learning and change ("your situation is your gift")

This element is illustrated by:

- Persons who are overcoming a life crisis (i.e. death of child, loss of a job)
- People making new connections and discovering new insights in the midst of chaotic situations (for example, celebrating the life of a daughter the night before her impending death)

In transformative learning a key element is **surfacing and questioning assumptions**.

This element enhances learning by:

- Encouraging questioning of "certainties"
- Analyzing problems in new ways
- Encouraging dialogue with the self (that is, self-reflection and examination)

This element is illustrated by:

- Keeping a journal
- Values clarification exercises
- Analysis of prior learning experiences

- Asking open-ended questions
- Critical thinking methodologies (for example, a surface-to-depth method of questioning such as *objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional*)
- Self-assessment

In transformative learning a key element is **experimenting with and embracing change**.

This enhances learning by:

- Opening learners to new experiences
- Teaching learners to have confidence in their capacity in the face of the unknown
- Providing opportunities for community service

This is illustrated by:

- Adults who enter non-traditional, development-focused programs
- Service learning (that is, students engaged in community service to fulfill a learning requirement)
- Immersion in other cultural environments

In transformative learning a key element is **deciding to risk action**. This element enhances learning by:

- Grounding experiences in action
- Taking beliefs and values seriously
- Encouraging vulnerability in learning
- Empowering outward demonstration

This element is illustrated by:

- The use of ropes courses and wilderness treks to push learner beyond perceived boundaries.
- Taking on a larger than imagined project
- Adult learners critically examining their lives (e.g. reflective autobiographies or prior learning assessment essays)
- Leading a community initiative
- Changing careers
- Adults returning to unfamiliar learning experiences to revisit the pain of vulnerability

#### IV. Embracing inclusiveness

In transformative learning a key element is **broadening and deepening the learning plan**. This element enhances learning by:

- Calling upon the use of multiple intelligences
- Connecting learning to the real world
- Recognizing and honoring differences in learning styles
- Expanding and deepening the capacities for reflection

This element is illustrated by:

- Integrating diverse themes (e.g. arts with sciences)
- Learning through play
- Tapping into alternative sources of information
- Utilizing cultural mentors and guides
- Using metacognitive models to occasion deep reflection

- Open-ended learning projects
- Learning that integrates theory, practice, and experience

In transformative learning a key element is **developing a wholistic perspective**. This element enhances learning by:

- Broadening the social context
- Integrating body, mind, and spirit
- Stretching the learner's vision
- Encouraging increasing inclusivity of one's understanding of self, family, society, culture, environment, and universe
- Encouraging exposure to all age groups
- Integration of all senses in learning process.

This element is illustrated by:

- International work-study trips
- Service learning in environmental projects
- "Unless we touch, we cannot see"

## V. Embracing mystery

In transformative learning a key element is **cultivating connections of the heart**.

This element enhances learning by:

- Providing space for emotional expression
- Acknowledging and celebrating differences and unity with all of humanity and life.
- Acknowledging the presence of wonder, awe, mystery.
- Integrating heart dimensions in cognitive learning by including creative expression, arts, and the affective dimension
- Acknowledging the critical significance of imagination

This element is illustrated by:

- Speaking to the heart through, for example, personal example, poetry, art.
- Fostering the expression of spirit by probing personal aspiration, motivation, and human potential through, for example, celebration and personal reflection.
- Acknowledging and reflecting upon death and other crisis experiences
- Recognizing every individual's search for meaning
- Drawing on each individual's construction of meaning
- Showing care for one another.
- Student peer mediation and service learning experiences.

Note: Various educational systems include many of these elements and practices. For example, Montessori schools, Dewey lab schools, developmentally-focused adult learning programs.

## KEY CHALLENGES TO TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

1. In transformative learning, a key challenge is **pedagogical inflexibility**.

It inhibits the learning process by **discouraging creative participation**.

This challenge is illustrated by

- teacher-directed learning
- limiting educators' and learners' roles
- failing to encourage different learning styles
- fragmenting learning
- time frames for subjects based on efficiency, not learning needs.

2. In transformative learning, a key challenge is **overdependence on external material resources**.

It inhibits the learning process by **creating a sense of powerlessness**.

This challenge is illustrated by

- frustration of educators in finding financial support
- depriving people of opportunities to be creative
- panic in the queue for the copy machine
- teachers, students, and parents having no voice in directing budget priorities
- thinking education only happens if you build an institutional facility
- feeling hopeless when resources are seemingly scant/scarce.

3. In transformative learning, a key challenge is **educational compartmentalization**.

It inhibits the learning process by **1) shutting out societal involvement, and 2) fragmenting the learner's perception of the wholistic nature of life**.

This challenge is illustrated by

- lack of involvement by parents and other unofficial educators, and by students themselves
- limited transfer of insights of school learning to industry and vice versa
- not tapping into cultural resources in the community
- rigidly defined curriculum documents and assessments
- not articulating and exploring connections between fields of learning.

4. In transformative learning, a key challenge is **imposition of embedded assumptions**.

It inhibits the learning process by **1) suppressing discussion and deepening of community values, and 2) cutting off values from real-life experience**.

This challenge is illustrated by

the "West is Best" image  
overvaluing of testing results leading to student sense of failure  
not tapping into learners' experience  
adopting media values without critical thinking  
exaggerating to get a point across, which triggers distrust in the long run, for  
example overexaggeration in drug and sex education

5. In transformative learning, a key challenge is **non-reflective teaching practice.**

It inhibits the learning process by **preventing educators from being flexible and learning.**

This challenge is illustrated by  
the "teacher is always right" mentality  
teaching styles that don't address all students' learning styles  
reflection not being built into all learning and therefore remaining superficial  
teacher training focused on transfer of content or skills without critical thinking  
educators not seeing selves as constant learners.

6. In transformative learning, a key challenge is **standardized expectations.**

It inhibits the learning process by **focusing on the quantification of learning, and instilling a sense of failure which leads to shame and giving up.**

This challenge is illustrated by  
a focus on multiple choice tests, standard curriculum, and short-term results  
education that is curriculum and organization driven, rather than student-driven  
exclusion of cultural learning that is not mainstream  
performance on tests does not have any correlation with success in life.

7. In transformative learning, a key challenge is **following society's pre-established values and patterns in an unquestioned repetition of tradition.**

It inhibits the learning process by **not allowing adjustment to changing conditions and discouraging innovation in transformational approaches.**

This challenge is illustrated by  
fear of change  
conflicting value interpretations  
- isolating learners from family and culture  
restricted resources, time, and support for questioning patterns and creating  
innovation  
promoting individualistic over collaborative learning  
emphasis on standardized testing and curriculum  
sterile classroom experiences

continuing old patterns and structures in face of known options.

**8. In transformative learning, a key challenge is entrenched formal bureaucratic systems.**

It inhibits the learning process by **preventing educators from exploring new visions.**

This challenge is illustrated by

- limiting education to formal structures with set operating patterns which are based on the power of hierarchy
- undersupported community boards and committees
- limited student participation in planning and decision-making
- belittling of experiential learning outside the formal system
- educators choosing to conform and be promoted rather than risk experimentation.

**9. In transformative learning, a key challenge is strong individualism.**

It inhibits the learning process by **blocking collaboration and creating a sense of isolation and discouragement.**

This challenge is illustrated by

- small isolated pockets of transformation on the margins of the education system
- competitiveness and wanting to get the credit
- educators who resist other educators' support and experience
- most sports focus on competition
- rewards (grades and awards) are for individuals and not for teamwork.